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## THE CONSUMERTARIAT: INFOPOCALYPSE AND THE PATHOLOGIES OF INFORMATION

ALL BARBARISM, BLÖDMASCHINEN, CAPITALISM, CONSUMERTARIAT, DIVIDUUM, INFOBORG, NON-NIHLISM

The acceleration of information exchange has produced and is producing an effect of a pathological type...

– Franco "Bifo" Berardi

*"The consumer society is a kind of soft police state. We think we have choice, but everything is compulsory. We have to keep buying or we fail as citizens. Consumerism creates huge unconscious needs that only fascism can satisfy. If anything, fascism is the form that consumerism takes when it opts for elective madness."*

J.G. Ballard as usual hits the proverbial nail on the head. With the advent of the Internet of things the exchange of the world is ubiquitous and totalized, a world where signs and objects exchange themselves within the alien host we long ago vacated. Emptied of our humanity, agents of an alien empire of signs, we host a world of alien objects like coded messengers from some infinite time machine. No longer able to process the data glut around us we've become immersed and eviscerated in a sea of information which uses us as its site of transversal relationality in an economic game of war without end. Berardi would tell us that we must begin to understand how our capacity to process information became instead a system that assimilated and absorbed us into a larger organism that now uses our processing power as a host assemblage factory. Our consciousness is emptied of its former dreams of reason and identity, self and subjectivity, and has become the vacant site of machinic agents who feed off our biopower to further their own alien agendas.

Alfred North Whitehead once described consciousness as nothing more than the hosted vacancy inhabited by alien entities: "Mental operations do not necessarily involve consciousness... It is only when we are consciously aware of alien mentalities that we even approximate to the conscious prehension of a single actual entity."<sup>2</sup> In an age of competitive advantage we are doomed to "follow, recognize, evaluate, process all" the information available to us if we are to be "efficient, competitive, victorious" (Berardi, p. 40). No longer able to read or think in a linear manner of textuality, dispersed among image-cultures that drift by like so many ghosts of futurity, we exist as members of a new data-glut world of graphic signs and semiotic economics – a visual non-space that like so many daemons of the electronic void have lost their ability to be attentive to even the most simplistic detail. Driven by a dyslexia spreading outward into the cognitive ecologies of mindless social behaviors of a presentism of the speed-instant, we wander in a time-loop slipstream that immerses us in the pursuit of the impossible (Berardi, p. 41).

*"Within me there is only the ruin of sovereignty. And my visible absence of superiority – my state of collapse – is the mark of an insubordinate which equals that of the starry sky."*

– Georges Bataille

Marshall McLuhan once described our predicament of mediaplosion, our immersion and evisceration within the info-glut regimes of information, saying that "one thing about which fish are completely unaware is the water, since they have no anti-environment that would allow them to perceive the element they swim in."<sup>3</sup> We've become so enamored and naturalized to the ubiquitous world of information that surrounds us in external objects – the Internet of things – that we've forgotten what it was like to once live in a world where machines were absent. Marx himself during the height of the First Industrial age would describe this process of absorption and alienation:

In handicrafts and manufacture, the worker makes use of a tool; in the factory, the machine makes use of him. There the movements of the instrument of labour proceed from him, here it is the movements of the machine that he must follow. In manufacture the workers are the parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism which is independent of the workers, who are incorporated into it as its living appendages. 'The wearisome routine of endless drudgery in which the same mechanical process is ever repeated, is like the torture of Sisyphus; the burden of toil, like the rock, is ever falling back upon the worn-out drudge.'<sup>4</sup>

This sense of the external death machine of capital that absorbs the surplus life of the drudge worker into its mechanical existence, the worker who animates the great beast of the Factory itself through repetition without difference – a living death without equal, pervades our lives 24/7. The Factory of the Globe is unbounded and everywhere. Whether one is at work or play one is working for the Factory. There can be no escape. One is always within the matrix of its clutches like an energy vat awaiting the next alien visitation or program to inhabit one's mind and reprogram one's desires. In this artificial sphere of light and information we call global capital – or, the *Consumertariat*, we've all entered a deathless sleeplessness, a chronic state of insomnia. In this realm of utter abjectness we can neither rest nor retreat, we move along the streets of Manhattan or any other global city like zombies seeking our next feeding station. Close off within the mental hives of our mobile phones connection to the electronic ghostlands we hover among the living like transparent bots unable to touch or be touched. Our senses depleted of their former physical traces to the earth below our feet wander the maze of roads by signs only, the glitz of commerce is our last foothold in a world of pure ambient plenitude.

What is the Factory today? Is it not the pervasive system of ubiquitous objects, machines of communication and information (ICT's) within which we have been incorporated like so many living machines all simultaneously processing data, following, analyzing, evaluating, and constructing capital for our Master's?

As Berardi will emphasize we are no longer able to keep up with the machines within which we live and have our being, we are no longer attentive to the everyday lives of our loved ones, our health, our actual world of caring and feeling; instead, we are bound to a 24/7 world of inattentive pressure and ruthless execution. Our machines in fact are outpacing even our decisioning processes, and have begun to replace humans in intelligence and economic multitasking. As Brynjolfsson and McAfee in their book the "Race Against the Machine," that the artificial intelligence boom has created machines that will replace humans in service industries that have traditionally been considered cornerstones of our economy. Equipped with new capabilities, such as the capacity for natural language, these machines will begin to displace human beings in core economic sectors, such as sales. And it's unclear what will happen to those displaced workers once they've lost their jobs to machines that can do the work of several humans at a much lower cost.

"It may seem paradoxical that faster progress can hurt wages and jobs for millions of people, but we argue that's what's been happening," Brynjolfsson and McAfee write. "Computers are now doing many things that used to be the domain of people only. The pace and scale of this encroachment into human skills is relatively recent and has profound economic implications. Perhaps the most important of these is that while digital progress grows the overall economic pie, it can do so while leaving some people, or even a lot of them, worse off."5

As Berardi will tell us this gap between speed and the slowness of the human brain and body to keep pace with the technological world of the economic markets of high-speed trading and other technologies is opening a pathological crack that is leading many of the cognitariat to immerse themselves in psychopharmaceuticals like Ritalin, Prozac, Zoloft and other psychotropic offerings which eventually lead to mental illness: dissociation, suffering, desperation, flight, panic, terror, the desire not to exist, to not have to fight to survive, and to vanish and disappear along side the ever growing need to kill or be killed through external mass murder or suicide. (Berardi, pp. 40-41)

Caught between the accelerating culture of narcotics: of the speed of cocaine, and the deceleration of heroin a world wide epidemic of executives and cognitariat have entered the stage of a sociopathological implosion of communicative diseases. Bound to a world that empowers sociopathy and disaffection rather than affectivity we are entering the *Affectless Age* where as Ballard says in his last major novel *Super-Cannes*: "...chief executives and main-board directors stumbled into work with persistent viral complaints. Worse than that, they all reported a loss of mental energy. Decision-making took longer, and they felt distracted by anxieties they couldn't identify. Chronic fatigue syndrome haunted the place."6

Yet, as Berardi admits the work of capital must go on and in this world what is most needed is just that, your psychic energy your life surplus and it is this that is in short supply because what is prevalent in the system of capital is no longer the free-floating energy of life but rather sadness, depression, panic and demotivation. (Berardi, p. 42) Yet, in an about face it is this very depressive realism that has brought about health issues in the masses, for they seek to assuage their dark depressions through consuming more and more junk food. As Berardi will remind us "buying is a suspension of anxiety, an antidote to loneliness, but only up to a certain point. Beyond this certain point, suffering becomes a demotivating factor for purchasing." (Berardi, p. 43) Our masters work overtime to convince us to be happy in their media and entertainment systems, while at the same time dissuading us from becoming too happy by imposing austere economic measures that force us to strategies of disaffection and panic. Caught in a circle of confused affectivity we ride the global wave of insanity like dark denizens of some apocalyptic zombie fest. Lonely and alone even in the midst of family and friends we have forgotten what it means to care and love, to be attentive to feelings and physical touch. Society demands sociopaths, while mixing the signals when those very sociopaths suddenly load up their weapons and seek ways of escape through violent acts of mass murder and suicide.

Berardi will ask us if it is already too late to decelerate the process of life in the Infospheric Civilization? His answer: yes, it is too late. "In human society, potentialities cannot be definitively canceled out, even when they are revealed to be lethal for the individual and probably even for the species." (Berardi, p. 43) As he sees it there are two paths forward: 1) the hyper-capitalist transhumanism of the *upgraded* human organism turned *Inforg*, whose mental and physical capacities are enhanced to keep

pace with the technological tyranny of the market economies; or, 2) the strategy of subtraction, of distancing ourselves from the vortex of capital, of refusal and small communities or spheres of existential, economic, and informatics autonomy developed within the ruins of this deadly machinic civilization. (Berardi, p. 43)

As Ballard would have one of his character say: 'Because there isn't any culture. All this alienation . . . I could easily get used to it' Even as our leaders and the executives and CEO's of our major corporations have all become confident and well-adjusted sociopaths we begin to realize that the mechanosphere is itself coming alive around us. The molecular life of machinic civilization is slowly rising out of the ashes of human memory and desire like the silicon flotsam and jetsam that crawled out of the oceans millennia ago. The replication of life by another path is emerging even as we begin to go blind, caught in the illusions of our own control systems we faintly apprehend that the technological mutations we've so longed for are happening in our midst. Our fascination and fear of the truth spreads its wings among the terrors of our war machines and cinematic lives as we begin slowly to adapt to this strange new world.

Isn't life wonderful?

And, after all, is this not the truth we're now facing, that it may already be too late to disconnect, to discover a way out, that we've all become so naturalized in this alienated world of artificial wonders, cut off from any sense of value or culture, that becoming other, becoming alien is what we do best – we're all aliens now. *Becoming alien, devoid of affects, pre-programmed to desire the consuming worlds of capital like zombies in a swarm of sadean delight we edge closer and closer to the day when we and our machines will become inextinguishable – drifters on the sea of the mechanosphere, agents of a new and terrible species. All the imaginary heavens and hells were but a prelude to the very real and material genesis of this final mutation, a paradise of machinic life and civilization that was up to now merely a dream and a foreboding of nightmares to come.*

*Now begins the Age of the Symbiont..*

*They have begun to move. They pass in line, out of the main station, out of downtown, and begin pushing into older and more desolate parts of the city. Is this the way out? Faces turn to the windows, but no one dares ask, not out loud. Rain comes down. No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into— they go in under archways, secret entrances of rotted concrete that only looked like loops of an underpass . . . certain trestles of blackened wood have moved slowly by overhead, and the smells begun of coal from days far to the past, smells of naphtha winters, of Sundays when no traffic came through, of the coral-like and mysteriously vital growth, around the blind curves and out the lonely spurs, a sour smell of rolling-stock absence, of maturing rust, developing through those emptying days brilliant and deep, especially at dawn, with blue shadows to seal its passage, to try to bring events to Absolute Zero . . . and it is poorer the deeper they go . . . ruinous secret cities of poor, places whose names he has never heard . . . the walls break down, the roofs get fewer and so do the chances for light. The road, which ought to be opening out into a broader highway, instead has been getting narrower, more broken, cornering tighter and tighter until all at once, much too soon, they are under the final arch: brakes grab and spring terribly. It is a judgment from which there is no appeal.*<sup>7</sup>

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4. Marx, Karl (2004-02-05). Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: A Critique of Political Economy v. 1 (Classics) (Kindle Locations 7953-7957). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.
5. see Sal Gentile *From Watson to Siri: As machines replace humans, are they creating inequality too?*
6. Ballard, J. G. (2010-04-01). Super-Cannes: A Novel (p. 253). Macmillan. Kindle Edition.
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